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Review of *Bound Like Grass: A Memoir from the Western High Plains* by Ruth McLaughlin

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Bound Like Grass: A Memoir from the Western High Plains. By Ruth McLaughlin. Foreword by Dee Garceau-Hagan. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010. ix + 184 pp. Photographs. \$24.95.

At a time when so many recent western women's memoirs either eschew the family farm or ranch as a bastion of male domination, or praise it as the fading location of authentic westernness, Ruth McLaughlin's memoir hits a new and sometimes heartbreaking note. Set in the High Plains of northern Montana, the memoir's dustcover photograph is riveting in its expressive ordinariness—and is a courageous choice to represent the lives within. Next to a barbed-wire fence, young Ruth, farm-kid skinny in oversized play clothes, gently pats a calf on the head. Behind them the landscape rolls on promisingly. Within the first few pages we learn that the calf has been separated from its mother to preserve her milk for the family and has worn the hair off his neck "from straining forward on his chain." "After rubbing the staked calf's head a few minutes, I would grow impatient and pull away. It did not occur to me that we had stolen more from the calf than our breakfast milk and cream for French desserts." That theft, and others, haunt this memoir.

The memoir's title, *Bound Like Grass*, is the central metaphor McLaughlin explores, often in truncated, abrupt paragraphs that push the reader roughly through events; there is no nostalgia for the past. The durability and endurance of prairie grasses, with their tangled pad of roots, pull McLaughlin back to her childhood home. Perhaps more central to the story she tells is the way in which such farm families and communities, like the buried weave of the prairie grasses, choke out new possibilities. The emotional costs of generations of dulling poverty, isolation, inherited behaviors, and unspoken pain make their way to the surface.

This memoir reveals what remained unspoken during much of McLaughlin's childhood: in a family with four children, one of the sisters, Ginny, has Down syndrome, and another, Rosemary, suffered brain damage at birth that made her verbally adept but emotionally volatile. Their brother Dwight fled to California after high-school graduation. McLaughlin is unsparing in describing a childhood where tenderness was intermittent, love struggled to show itself, and efforts to protect themselves from the community's curiosity about her sisters' disabilities pushed the family to close ranks within itself, increasing their isolation. McLaughlin is equally unsparing with herself, as she remembers both loving her sisters and being separated from them by the gulfs of distance and capability. As McLaughlin writes, the farm, her grandparents, parents, and two sisters exist only in memory; the memoir preserves a way of life that she, and we, look back on with pained recognition and a sigh of relief mingled with sadness.

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